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ABSTRACT

The survival of English teachers depends on their ability to define themselves in terms of the practical and material survival of society. Among those re-evaluators of teacher roles in light of social responsibility are Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, authors of "Teaching as a Subversive Activity," John Fischer, advocate of ecological awareness in all educational realms, John Holt and James Moffett, who perceive language learning as part of the total communication system, and Third Force psychologists such as Maslow, Rogers, and Horney. On the basis of this background, English teachers should view the writing class as preparation for students to meet public and personal challenges, encourage the use of language skills to achieve relevant communication tasks, and present language as both a communication tool and as an individualized mode of perception. Since the acquisition of communications skills occurs in the whole communications context and no connection necessarily exists between skill level and factual knowledge about language, learning should not be broken down into small units, but rather, objectives must have a clear relationship to the context. This "experience-centered approach" unites skills mastery, imagination, and personal growth. (KS)

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ENGLISH TEACHERS, AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

It is clear today that the field of English is involved in an extensive and somewhat bitter controversy. There is wide public concern about the degree of literacy in our society. And there seems to be nearly as wide a feeling that English teachers have lately failed us and that English as a field has strayed from its rightful place and purpose. There is, for example, the continual suggestion that English is failing its "fundamental" responsibilitty to teach people to read and write.

Whether or not there is a crisis in literacy in our country is one question, and a very hard one. But I don't propose to answer that question here. I think there are two narrower questions worth answering in the midst of society's broader inquiries. And, I think these narrower questions can add perspective on the overall public dialogue. The first question is: What should be the basic direction of our profession today, whether there is a crisis or not? And the second is: Given that English teachers are not the only participants in the dialogue on our profession, nevertheless what position, if any, should English teachers advocate for our future in their role in the swirl of public discussion?

Given the widespread pressure being brought to bear on elementary, secondary, and university departments of English by legislatures, school boards, and citizens at large; and given the continuing economic crisis of our country, it is not too strong to suggest that these questions concern not just our rightful "interests" but our material and spiritual survival as a profession. I mean to answer the first question, and to thereby imply an answer to the second by taking another look at recent thought and research. There are studies we all know about. But I fear that under the latest flood of criticism our memories of them may grow vague. And, in any case, we need to turn the light of these studies onto the modern debate, and into the modern crisis in our profession.

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In 1969 Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner published Teaching as a Subversive Activity, and with that book a great wave in the field of English flowing toward innovation and toward experience-centered approaches to the classroom finished rising and crested into its downward arc. Several old self-definitions in our profession had become inadequate in the face of works like Postman and Weingartner's. Among these was our sense of ourselves as keepers of the keys to culture, as intercessors between mankind and the sacred books in literary history, and as egocentric but necessary aesthetes.

Now Englsih had come to the point where it said it realized it had its own small responsibility for assisting individuals in their attempt to survive in the modern world and also some responsibility, perhaps smaller still, to assist in the survival of the world as well. Postman and Weingartner were devastating in their listing of challenges people of the sixties needed to face, citing everything from the existence of the laser beam to the challenge of fields like biochemistry. It seemed clear to many of us that English had been teaching "subjects" rather than students, as Postman and Weingartner said and that to meet the challenge we would have to change our ways somehow.

Describing the way in which English ought to become more relevant became an activity frought with controversy, however. And from the start there were some extreme definitions of "relevance" offered. On one pole or extreme was the insistence that school in general needed to prove that what it was doing was "practical" and "basic" to society somehow.

Also in 1969 a man named John Fischer, who was previously Editor-In-Chief of Harper's Magazine, wrote an essay published in that magazine called "Survival U" in which he proposed that universities be reorganized around a concern for the survival of the world ecologically. Only courses and attitudes related to the field of human ecology would be taught in this university.

Fischer had ideas about how Biology, Engineering, Earth Sciences, Math, and Politics might work toward this goal. But about English he had almost nothing to say, except to note in passing that, "students interested in music, junk sculpture, the Theater of the Absurd, and the literary dicta of Leslie Fiedler can go somewhere else." English teachers were left to figure out for themselves as best they could how they might fit in. But one thing we could be sure of with attitudes like Fischer's was that nothing but the most practical explanation of what we were about would do.

About the only part of most English programs that clearly could fit in to Fischer's Survival University was the freshman writing course, or the "basic" writing course. Surely the graduates that Fischer envisioned would need to be able to communicate. So, if the freshman writing course taught students to better function as cummunicators in relation to questions of survival there might be a place for it.

The concern for survival is something that Postman and Weingartner and Fischer shared. But while that issue raised for Postman and Weingartner vast and rich possibilities for the profession of English, for Fischer it suggested that perhaps there wasn't any future for our profession at all. We could all go slobber over Leslie Fiedler if we wanted to; but Fischer was dammed if he was going to sanction it, or support it.

I believe Postman and Weingartner showed us responsibilities our profession can never again rightfully deny. But with equal clarity John Fischer showed us the direction from which public and economic pressure would come to bear on our profession in the seventies. As he led us to expect there has been tremendous pressure on English teachers to demonstrate the practical and technical nature of what they are teaching. And indeed the ability to demonstrate these attributes clearly has become a fundamental test of survival for universities and departments across the country. The survival of English teachers seems to depend on our willingness and ability to define ourselves in practical terms and in terms of the material survival of our society.

Postman and Weingartner have offered a way of understanding and meeting the challenge of the Fischer society of the seventies, and some ways of surviving as a profession as well. And thought and research in several fields has led to a set of profound conclusions about language and language learning.

Third Force psychology (Carl Rogers, Karen Horney, and Abraham Maslow especially) has demonstrated that the healthy person is one who develops skills appropriate to his needs and to the exigencies of his world, and who is able to respond imaginatively to situations and to other people, able to conceive of new contexts and new perceptions beyond what is required of a technical set of skills. Students of society like Alvin Toffler, Future Shock, have offered examples of how society is now changing so rapidly that the challenge of education must not merely be to turn out someone who has technical skills (even language skills) but also to nuture the development of the imagination and the ability to adapt. These studies imply at least and often directly suggest (Rogers especially) a classroom relationship in which students' rights and abilities are respected and in which students are encouraged to imaginatively respond instead of memorizing data or performing by rote.

In the area of language learning more directly Postman and Weingartner have been joined by writers like John Holt and James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse, in demonstrating how language learning is done in the context of communication experiences from childhood through adulthood. These books demonstrate further how language skills can be taught in the classroom context of treating language seriously as communication, and how writing and speaking usually become interesting to students when they are encouraged to pursue meaningful and exploratory communication and when this goal is respected in discussions of the writing which results. Moffett is particularly concerned to distinguish between what may be worthwhile studies of rhetoric, and communication. He suggests that for writing classes rhetorical principles become important not as a body of knowledge to be learned but when they provide tactics for improving student's efforts at communication.

This background of study beyond and within the field of English suggests several important conclusions. First, it is appropriate for the profession of English to continue to present the writing class as a valuable and even central experience in the preparation of students to meet public and personal challenges. Second, it is important to approve of the use of language to achieve communication tasks taat the students believe are worthwhile and which constitute an imaginative groping with language and with the world. Third, it is important to help students as they write, rather than present a body of knowledge. Fourth, it is necessary to respect the class as an audience since they more broadly represent a real audience than any one person could (and since it is not likely that a person comunicating seriously would only wish to communicate to English teachers). And, finally, it is important for the teacher to see, and to help his students to see, that although language is indeed a tool, it is not merely a tool. Language and conception, or language and perception, are very closely related; and language is so closely related to the individual person and to the imagination that it can be a main way for probing for solutions to the serious challenges of modern society.

But, even people who accept this research in general and these basic assumptions have had much difficulty in working from these ideas toward practical notions about how to teach. There are two narrower conclusions that have been drawn consistently in modern research about learning language skills that begin to answer this problem. The first conclusion suggests that learning communication skills taks place <u>almost exclusively</u> in communications context. This is not just the way it can be done; it is the way pretty much that language learning <u>is</u> done. We learn to talk, and write, and read as we talk, and write, and read and as we get feedback from our surroundings. We adapt as we get feedback and as we observe those with whom we are communicating.

The second conclusion, supported especially by research in the teaching of writing and reading, is that no connection necessarily exists between knowledge of facts about language and a person's ability to read or write. Ken Goodman and others flatly state, in Choosing Materials to Teach Reading and other places, that "a large body of research can be cited which shows that there is no significant relationship between language information and reading ability" (p. 96). He suggests that time spent on learning language information or in practicing non-communication language skills should not be done as a way to teach people to read or write because the assumption that transfer of training will take place is in error (p. 98). For example, although students are perfectly capable of learning even quite long lists of vocabulary words for short term testing purposes research shows that they retain and use only words which they can see apply to relatively authentic communications contexts they are or will be involved in.

There is public and legislative pressure, however, to be as clear as we can be about our goals, and to be as practical as we can be in choosing our goals. Under this pressure there has developed a fairly wide trend stressing the handiness of breaking language learning into small units (this used to be in evidence in the memorization approach to learning grammar; but now it can be more widely observed in limited behaviorial objectives like "student can recognize and label the three different paragraph structures," or "student can produce the five rhetorical types of theme patterns"). Research has also failed to establish a connection between this type of objective and actual development of students' communication skills. I believe this is the type of "language information" that Goodman and others agree is not directly relevant to developing students as communicators.

One of the things this means is that goals must be put in terms of actual communications and central accomplishments of whole effective communications. More limited objectives also must have a clear relationship to this context. A student who has particular problems with getting his focus narrow enough early in his papers might very well be willing to and benefit from practicing "introductions"

to several papers. But, if the student has no such difficulty or if the practice is isolated and not a clear step toward real communication the student can be expected to lose the ability to transfer what he is learning into his communications abilities. And should short term objectives become a dominant influence over authentic communication goals a breakdown of learning communications skills will take place.

My main conclusions, then, may be "old news," The experience-centered approach to the teaching of English, and especially writing, is not a senstivity group approach or an ignorant "do-gooder's" approach which would substitute being kind for teaching and learning. Both the sensitivity approach and the do-gooder approach existed in the sixties, but they are not to be equated with experience-centered attitudes to the classroom, which result from the strongest threads of modern research in the profession.

It is the experience-centered approach which provides the ground from which communication skills learning, development of the imagination, and personal growth of students can be united. And, this is the only way we can meet our responsibility to assist in world survival.

Perhaps it seems ironic that this is also the ground from which we can best guarantee the survival of our profession, since it does not involve resorting to a purely technical perspective on ourselves. But in anything but the shortest of the short runs this is the direction that will make our profession relevant and defensible. Over the next ten years it is the intelligent extending and adapting of the experience-centered approach which can keep English teachers from becoming extinct. Self-serving and service to society happily are linked for our profession in experience-centered framworks for our classrooms. But it will take courage for teachers to continue in this direction.